The Undergrounders
&
the Deception of the Dead



C T Frankcom

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Other titles in this series:

The Undergrounders & the Flight of the Falcon

For Tim x

Prologue:

From: Anonymous
To: J21
Re: Bird of Prey {Encrypted}

I see that the bird you had been so carefully monitoring has slipped through your poorly constructed net and not only released his flock but escaped with some precious cargo.

I handed him to you on a plate, yet a thirteen-year old boy could see things more clearly than your whole unit. Your entire operation is a disgrace.

Here's a piece of hard-earned advice: you need to look more closely at your own flock. You need to decide who you can trust and who you cannot.

I will be in touch. You are not the only one who would quite happily see the bird of prey caged for good.

End.

From: J21
To: Anonymous
Re: Bird of Prey {Encrypted}

Who are you?
How did you get this comms address?

End.

From: Anonymous
To: J21
Re: Bird of Prey {Encrypted}

It doesn't matter who I am – what matters is that I know where you can find her.
Await my instructions.

End.

Chapter 1: Tormented

The fine, icy spray swept across George's face. He could feel it stinging his eyes and burning his open cuts. He was flat on his back – every limb felt broken. The water slapped at his feet and then rolled towards his head as the ground beneath him seemed to sway and rock. His ears were submerged again, and the screaming and groaning returned. He could hear her voice – calling for help, "George!"

I must save her.

The water rose with every new wave.

She will drown.

He shivered and tried to open his eyes, but the salty water forced them closed again. In a flicker, he could see them circling above – the birds. With greedy eyes and razor talons, they were waiting to take their prey as soon as it was weak enough.

George strained against the weight of his sodden clothes, dug in his heels and pushed hard at the debris at his feet. He turned. There, protruding from the shallow, sandy grave, was a thin fragile arm. Her head was turned towards him, and her fine hair was plastered to her damp face.

"Gran!"

As he heaved himself up, his legs felt like jelly; his feet sank into the soft, flowing sand. He dragged one foot and then the next, but fell to his knees – she felt no closer. However hard he tried, she remained just beyond his reach. He screamed her name again, and her eyes peered up at him – her soft, warm eyes.

A shadow descended, covering the bay in darkness. George looked up. They were coming: giant falcons, swooping down, talons bared, coming to take her away.

No! Leave her! Leave her alone!

George raised his arms. The gun was clamped in his trembling fist. He wanted to drop it, but his fingers were frozen rigid. It felt heavy and the metal seared his skin.

No, I won't! I won't do it!

He tried to shake the weapon from his grip, but she was screaming again, louder and louder.

"*George! George! George…"*

"George! George, wake up!"

George woke. Sweat trickled down his forehead. The bed felt like it was still swaying. He steadied himself and looked into his dad's puffy eyes.

"You fell asleep," his dad whispered, his voice hoarse. "It's gone midday."

George and Sam had barely slept since she'd been taken. It had been five days that had merged into one long nightmare. Five days of people George didn't know coming and going from the house. Five days of fear, false hopes and grasping at fitful sleep. Five days with barely any news.

Sam's mood was the darkest George had ever seen: his eyes sunken, his untrimmed beard burying his tense jaw and his temper at its most explosive. And yet, he had spent more time with George in those five days than at any other time in George's memory.

Sam sank down onto the end of George's bed.

"Have you heard anything?" George asked, sitting up and rubbing the crust from his eyes.

He was still in his clothes. His hair was beyond help, and his head still ached from the blow he'd taken while

being held hostage by the same gang that now had his gran. The pain was a constant reminder to him of what Victor Sokolov and his crew were capable of, and he knew that as every day slipped past, Gran was likely to be in more and more danger.

"Nothing, George. I'm sorry," Sam said, his head in his hands. "The last report we had was yesterday's. We haven't managed to pick up the tail since we had to drop it at Dover. We have to believe he won't hurt her if we don't try to follow them."

"But, Dad, if he's taken her over the Channel, we'll never know where she is … We need to … You must keep following."

"We have to trust the team. They know what they're doing."

MI5 had brought in a specialist team to try to track Victor's movements. It had proven almost impossible, as Victor's crew had split up. No one really knew where Gran was, and George could feel her slipping further and further away from him. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat beside his dad.

"What about Philippe and Mr Jefferson?" George asked. "They must know something."

"Freddie is pushing them as hard as he can, but they're not talking," Sam replied, his head still buried in his hands.

George looked at his dad. He'd never seen him this dejected. He could see a shadow of how he must have been when George's mum had died. Gran had once told George that his dad hadn't come out of his shed for almost three weeks after they announced her death.

George knew that Sam was blaming himself for Gran being taken, but he couldn't understand why he wasn't out there searching for her.

"Dad, *you* should interrogate them," George said, hoping that he could nudge him into action.

"I can't," Sam replied, finally looking up. "They won't let me. It's too … personal."

"There must be something they can do to force them to talk."

George was frustrated. He was sure that Philippe and his old form tutor, Mr Jefferson, must know where the agreed rendezvous point was. He couldn't stop picturing Gran tied up, frightened and somewhere far away from Chiddingham.

With that, Marshall peered around the corner of George's bedroom door. He looked more bedraggled than ever and had lost weight. George had forgotten to feed him for the first three days, until he'd found the cat tearing at the cupboard door that held his kibble.

Marshall slunk over to George's bed and wound his way through George and Sam's ankles. George lifted him onto the pillow and smoothed his scruffy fur. He didn't have much affection for the cat, but somehow he felt closer to Gran when Marshall was around. Sam must have felt it too, because he suddenly stood up.

"I can't sit here any longer doing nothing," he said, striding from the room.

"What are you going to do?" George asked, jumping up and following him out onto the landing.

"I'm going into the office. We need to take you in for your debrief, anyway. I'll go and see Freddie and the chief."

"Great!" cried George, bounding down the stairs behind him.

"You're right, George. We need to put more pressure on Philippe and Jefferson. I'll camp outside the interrogation room if I have to."

Sam made his way down the corridor, but George stopped at the bottom of the stairs and stared at the small pinprick on the back of the front door where the note from Victor had been left. He could see the tip of the yellow tape that had barred them from the house while forensics had scoured the place. The dusted fingerprints still remained on the glossy paintwork. The lock had been changed, but the wood was still splintered, and standing behind the door, George could almost feel the fear that Gran must have felt as someone forced their way into her home.

Sam had come back down the corridor. He placed his hands on George's shoulders. "Are you OK?"

"We need to sort out the door," George said.

He could feel the tears coming again, but he tried to shake them off.

"We need to leave it all as it is," Sam said. "There could still be clues here – clues as to who took her."

"It was Victor!" George spat. "He barged into our home and–"

"Wait! That's it!" Sam said, staring at the door. "Victor didn't come back here!"

"What?"

"Of course! How did I not see it? Victor wasn't here – none of them were here!"

"But how…"

"He must have sent someone else … there's someone else, George!" Sam yelled, charging back down the hallway towards the kitchen. "They wouldn't have risked coming

here and getting caught, especially once they'd got away with the weapon. There must be someone else!"

With that, Sam disappeared through the back door and out towards his shed.

"Get washed and dressed," he called back over his shoulder. "You smell!"

George didn't need asking twice. He hosed himself down, combed his hair and put on fresh clothes. He dumped the tracksuit bottoms and t-shirt, that he'd been wearing for two days straight, into the laundry basket. It was almost full. Gran would usually keep on top of all that kind of stuff. George looked away. He couldn't imagine them coping without her. He grabbed his hoodie from the back of his chair and dashed back downstairs.

When he entered the kitchen, Sam was sitting at the breakfast bar hunched over a small handheld device, just larger than a phone. He was swigging black coffee.

"I've put toast and beans on," he said, not looking up. "We need to eat."

George agreed. They'd survived on minimal snacks to stave off the hunger pangs but hadn't eaten a real meal in five days.

George stirred the beans and buttered the toast. He rummaged in the fridge and found a carton of long-life orange juice. The milk had gone bad. He poured two glasses of juice, served the beans and sat next to his dad and ate.

George peered over his dad's shoulder at the device in his hand, but the screen was blank.

"Er, Dad, are you OK?" he asked, worried that his dad had gone mad.

"Huh?"

"It's just, you've been staring at that blank screen for more than five minutes and–"

Sam chuckled. "It's not blank, George, see."

Sam turned the device towards him. When looking at it straight on, you could see a dim black and green screen. George looked puzzled.

"It's a surveillance tablet," Sam said. "To anyone else it looks like a normal smartphone, but you can only view the data from a certain angle. Stops people being nosey and reading over your shoulder," he explained, raising an eyebrow in George's direction.

"Oh, sorry, I just…"

"It's OK. I'm just looking through a list of Victor's associates and their last known locations. I think there must be someone else involved. Someone that Victor thinks we wouldn't suspect. Someone who could have easily come into Chiddingham without raising any suspicions."

"Right, makes sense," George said. "Got any leads?" Sam raised an eyebrow again, and George sighed. "Of course – you can't tell me, right?"

"Afraid not."

"Maybe I could help. Maybe I saw someone when we were in London."

"Well, that's what today's debrief should help us find out. Are you ready?"

"Yes, definitely," George said, sliding off his stool and dumping his empty plate in the sink.

George left some water and snacks out for Marshall who seemed grateful enough. He grabbed his newly cut keys and made his way to the front door. Sam was heaving on his heavy boots and had pulled his faded blue cap on. They both glanced at Gran's well-worn armchair as they

passed the lounge door. Without saying another word, they left the cottage behind them and clambered into Sam's van.

As they pulled out of the village, George realised that he had no idea where his dad's office was.

"Are we going to London?" he asked.

"No, I don't spend much time at HQ. I have a … regional office," Sam said carefully. "But it's not a publicly known location, so I can't take you there, I'm afraid."

"So, where has Freddie got Jefferson and Philippe?"

"Ah, I can't tell you that either."

"But I thought we were going to–"

"I said I'd take you in for your debrief and then I'll go and see Freddie. I've arranged for you to meet a colleague of mine, Officer Knowles, at the Pendleton police station."

"Right – of course." George said, sliding down in his seat.

Now that he knew about his dad's job at MI5, he hated being left out. He had barely paid any interest when he thought his dad was a self-employed plumber. Sam was never around, and their relationship had been fragile at best. Now that he knew, he felt much closer to him, but there seemed to be even more secrets, and George hated it. He felt like he could never fully be part of his dad's life.

"I'm sorry," Sam said, noticing George's mood change. "I do trust you, you know that, right?"

"I know, Dad. Just promise me you'll do everything you can to find her. I can't bear another day not knowing where she is."

"Me too, George."

They drove the rest of the way in silence, and before long, they pulled up to the security barrier outside the

small police station. It was manned by a female security guard who was slumped on a rather uncomfortable looking chair with her feet propped up on the window ledge of her small hut. Sam had to honk the horn to get her attention.

She held up her hand to acknowledge them but continued to read her book. Sam honked his horn again. She finally lifted her head, put down her book and strolled over to Sam's van.

"Can I help you?" she said, leaning in through the window and peering around the cab.

"About time," Sam grumbled. "Are we disturbing you?"

George cringed. His dad's patience was at its thinnest, but the guard had obviously heard it all before.

"Do you want to be let in?" she asked, frostily.

Sam's nostrils flared. "We're here for an appointment with Officer Cate Knowles."

"Right, one minute," she said, sauntering back to her hut.

She rifled through a pile of paperwork on her desk. Sam tutted and shook his head. George was pretty sure she would have heard, but she chose to ignore him. Finally, she found what she was looking for and made her way back over.

"Name?" she said, peering down at her crumpled piece of paper.

"Jenkins," Sam said, curtly.

"Yes, here you are. Go through and park anywhere on the left. Not the red spaces!"

Sam closed the window and put his foot down, almost taking out the slowly rising barrier.

"You OK, Dad?" George asked, as they parked up.

"Yes, just can't abide time-wasters," he grumbled. "Let's get you inside."

They were buzzed into a small lobby filled with plastic chairs. A friendly old man at the front desk signed them in and called Officer Knowles.

George suddenly realised that he was actually quite anxious about his interview. He hadn't thought about it, or much about what had happened in London, since Gran had disappeared – maybe because he didn't want to. Now he was going to have to go through it all step by step.

"Will you come in with me?" he asked Sam.

"If you want me to," Sam said, as they perched on the plastic seats. "But there's nothing to be worried about. You're not being interrogated. Cate's job is to document everything that you can remember about what happened. That's all."

Just then, a set of internal doors swung open and a young woman in a smart, navy suit stepped out. She made her way towards them, smiling.

"I don't need you to stay," George said, suddenly standing up and striding towards Officer Knowles.

"Are you sure?" Sam called after him.

"Yes, I want you to go and nail Philippe and Jefferson!"

From: J21
To: Anonymous
Re: Bird of Prey {Encrypted}

Why haven't I heard from you?
You said you knew where she was.
If you are serious about helping us, I need to know what intel you have.

End.

Chapter 2: Adrift

George sat with Officer Knowles for over four hours, only stopping once for a loo break and a small snack. The room was cold (which she apologised for several times), so he kept his coat on. She said he could call her Cate and spoke gently, letting him do most of the talking. Another lady sat in the room with them but said nothing. She was introduced to him, but he'd forgotten her name. All he remembered was that she was some kind of chaperone.

George struggled to keep his mind focused. He tried to recall everything that had happened from the day he had delivered the paper to (the now deceased) Mrs Hodge, through to his dad entering the cave and saving him from Victor. It was amazing how quickly some of the details had blurred in his head.

"It's OK, George. Take your time. It's alright if you can't remember everything," Cate said, as he glazed over again. "Do you need another break?"

"Huh? No, no – I'm fine."

In truth, he wasn't even thinking about that day. He was thinking about whether his dad had managed to get to Philippe and Jefferson.

"Shall we talk about what happened after you got home?" Cate asked, her expression soft.

"Why?" George said, a little more abruptly than he'd intended.

She sat back in her chair and closed her folder.

"I know it's painful, George, but maybe there's something about the house, the scene when you came home, that might give us a clue as to who entered your home and took…"

"Does it really matter?" he said. "It was Victor. It was all Victor. Even if it wasn't him in the house, it was his idea!"

"I think that's enough for today," the other woman said, rising from her seat.

Cate nodded.

"You've done brilliantly, George. You've given us so much," she said, smiling. "I can't imagine how hard this is for you."

"I'm sorry," he said, sighing. "If I think of anything else, I'll…"

"You can call me, anytime. Your dad has my number. I'll call him now and let him know that we're done."

They shook hands, and George followed the other woman back out of the double doors and into the lobby. She deposited him in the entrance hall and left him with some leaflets on witness support. He didn't look at them. He wanted to call his dad. Instinctively, he shoved his hand into his jacket pocket to grab his mobile but quickly remembered that Mr Jefferson had taken it, and it was now sitting in an evidence bag somewhere within the confines of MI5.

Bored, restless and impatient to hear news, he got up and stared out of the window. He was about to ask the old guy behind the reception desk to borrow the phone, when the front doors opened and Felix bounded in.

"Felix!" George exclaimed.

"George! Where have you been? You've gone radio silent on me," Felix said, grabbing him and nearly knocking him over with his embrace.

George had been so lost in his own world that he'd barely thought of anyone else. Felix didn't even know about Gran.

"Man … I … how are you?"

He wasn't sure what he could tell Felix. Felix was the only one who had been there when Victor and his gang had escaped and the only one who knew that Sam worked for MI5. But he didn't know about the stolen weapon or about anything that had happened since.

"I'm good – you know – got my bandages off," Felix said, raising his hands up to show George. "Your face still looks pretty smashed up."

George grimaced. "Yeah, guess so." That was the least of his worries.

"At least that makes me the better looking one now," Felix grinned.

George grinned back. "It's really good to see you. What are you here for?"

"I thought of some stuff I'd forgotten to mention to Officer Knowles. You?"

"Like what?" George asked, intrigued.

"Stuff I saw in the woods after I left you in the tunnels."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I got lost on my way back to school and now remember seeing a burnt-out fire. I thought it was weird because I figured: who'd be down there doing a fire?"

"What, like a bonfire?"

"I didn't stop to check it out, but it looked like burnt paper – not wood."

"Mr Patterson?" Cate had returned. "I can see you now."

"Gotta' go," Felix said, slapping George on the back.

"Yeah, of course. Call me later," George said, as he watched Felix disappearing through the double doors.

"Sure thing," Felix called back. "You've gotta' answer the phone though, mate."

George and Sam's phone had been redirected via a secure line to tap any incoming calls. All calls were being screened by MI5. They had left a daily log with Sam, but neither of them had looked at it. Poor Felix must have thought he'd been ignoring him.

The doors flew open again, and Sam stormed in. He looked like he'd had a bad day.

"Dad," George said, "what happened at–"

"Let's go," Sam said, making his way back out of the doors.

George had to run to catch up with him. He barely managed to pull himself into the cab of the van before Sam pulled off. He was struggling to get his seatbelt on as they exited the car park and careered around a corner. He nearly ended up on Sam's lap.

"Dad, slow down," George said. "What happened?"

"Nothing!" Sam shouted. "Precisely nothing!"

"Did you see Philippe and–"

"Eventually, after a lot of begging."

"Well, what did they say?"

"Ten minutes I got with them each. Liars – both of them, bare-faced liars!"

Sam nearly took out the back of a bus. He swerved, throwing George's head against the window.

"Ow!"

Sam slammed on the brakes – red light. He looked over at George who was rubbing his temple.

"Oh God, sorry, George … I'm so sorry … I…"

He was trembling.

"It's OK, Dad. I understand. I feel the same way."

With that, Sam's eyes filled with tears.

"I've let you down. I've let everyone down. I've let Gran down…"

George had never seen his dad cry. His face was in his hands. George could feel his own eyes welling up. Seeing his dad break down was too much.

Sam's phone buzzed. He lifted his head, wiped his face with his sleeve and looked down at it. His eyes widened as they scanned back and forth over the message. He threw the phone down, yanked the van into reverse and did a full U-turn in the middle of the junction. Several cars had to skid to a halt as Sam's beaten up van veered across the oncoming traffic. They must have looked like convicts on the run.

"Dad, what's going on?" George asked, gripping tightly to the cab's side handle as they weaved between the traffic at top speed. "Dad!"

"I know where she is!"

George's heart skipped a beat. "How? How do you know?"

"A tip off – hold on tight."

They raced back through town and out onto the motorway. Sam broke every traffic law, making several fellow drivers throw curses and hand gestures at them as they passed. Sam didn't say another thing until they eventually pulled up to the entrance of the Dungeness National Nature Reserve.

George peered out of the window. It was late and there wasn't another soul for as far as the eye could see. The flat, sparse marshland extended all the way to the sea. The barren landscape was littered with crumbling outhouses and abandoned rowing boats, and a rusting train line swept across the shingled bay. The horizon was only interrupted by a couple of lighthouses and the imposing outline of the

Dungeness Nuclear Power Station. George wasn't sure what made it special enough to be a nature reserve.

"Here? Is she here?" George whispered, barely able to breathe. "There's no one here, Dad."

Sam was looking down at his phone again. "Yes, at least – let's hope so."

"Are you sure?"

"I need you to stay in the van," Sam suddenly said, looking up.

"No, I want to come with you."

"No, please, George, stay here. I don't know what I'll find."

Sam opened the door and leapt out. George twisted and watched him disappear to the back of the van. He could hear him rummaging around in the back before the rear doors slammed shut again and he re-appeared at George's window.

"Take the keys and this spare phone," he said. "If I'm not back in fifteen minutes, call Freddie. His number is in the contacts under C38."

"What? But–"

"Lock the doors and stay here."

George watched his dad as he ran across the flat scrubland, past a cluster of crumbling sheds and off towards the waterline.

Ten, fifteen minutes passed. He peered out of the front windscreen – no sign of his dad, no movement at the water's edge. Heavy clouds raced across the fading skyline. George's brain whirred. He fidgeted.

Where is he? Is she there? Is she alive?

Giving in to his anxiety, he picked up the phone, but just as he was about to dial, lights appeared down at the water's edge. He could make out someone's silhouette and

a boat. A boat was steaming across the water towards the dark figure. Unable to contain his fear any longer, he burst from the van and raced out across the flats, hurdling over large areas of scrub and skipping around a couple of old fishing boats, not once letting his eyes stray from the source of light.

As he got closer, he could make out two figures, and the boat had hit land. He ran harder, his ankles turning as his footing slid in the deep shingle. Twenty metres to go – he could now see the Coast Guard's flag hanging from the back of the boat and Sam – he could see Sam and a small dinghy – a black, rubber boat. It had been thrown up onto a ridge of stones.

George slowed. An arm hung over the side of the dinghy – a small, frail arm. He couldn't move. His breathing sharp and broken, he could feel the tears and the panic rising in him. He tried to call out to his dad.

"Is she alive?"

But his words were lost in the wind as the air above blasted him like a tornado. He ducked, just as a helicopter swooped overhead. It turned a full 180 degrees and descended further up the beach, its searchlight casting a glaring arch across the bay and its rotors whipping up stones and grass. George covered his eyes.

The wind dropped as the rotors stilled, and George stared at the scene ahead of him. Bodies surrounded the dinghy. Someone had climbed in beside her. George's eyes stayed firmly fixed on her fingers. He prayed for any sign of movement, but there was none. Someone moved into his line of sight. He edged forwards – one step and then another until he could see her. So pale and small, her tiny frame was engulfed by a large, silver blanket. Only her face

was now exposed. It was ghostly white, and the shadow of a bruise swamped her left cheek.

George's chest was shuddering. He dared not believe that she was dead even though every fibre of his body feared it to be true. He stood paralysed, a useless bystander, as the medics and coast guard hooked her up to mobile monitors and wrapped another blanket around her. He could feel himself floating inside his own head. He felt dizzy.

"George!" It was Sam. "George, look at me."

George looked up. "Dad, is she…"

"She's in a bad way – hyperthermia at the very least – but she's with us now."

"Will she be OK?"

"We'll get her the best care. We won't let anything bad happen, George, I promise," Sam said, engulfing him in a hug.

George couldn't fight back the tears any longer – relief and fear. He buried his face and stifled a scream. All he could picture was her tiny, limp body and the anger seared inside him. He looked up as they lifted her onto the stretcher. As he closed his eyes again, Victor's face floated into his vision – his dark, soulless eyes – his rough, scarred hands – the menacing falcon tattoo that covered half of his shaven head. In that moment, George silently swore to himself that he would stop at nothing to make Victor pay.

From: J21
To: Anonymous
Re: Bird of Prey {Encrypted}

Thank you.

End.

From: Anonymous
To: J21
Re: Bird of Prey {Encrypted}

This is only just the beginning.
We have a bird to catch.

End.

Chapter 3: Time to Heal

George came to. He was too hot and the air smelt of bandages and disinfectant. He tried to shift his position but was buried beneath a thick woollen blanket and wedged into a battered, old, leather chair. The room was dark, but he could make out the outline of Gran's features silhouetted against the glare from her monitors.

He had slept deep and long, but he ached from being crammed into the confines of the chair. One leg was hanging over the armrest and had gone dead – he couldn't feel his toes. He tried to lift it, but it was as if all the muscles and bones had melted away, leaving him with a jelly-like stump that refused to move.

He tried to wiggle his toes. Slowly, he could feel a tiny tingling in his foot. It stung and prickled like a thousand needles, but he continued to urge it back to life. The sensation crept up his shin until, finally, he could swing it back over the armrest and onto the floor.

"Gran," he whispered. "Gran, are you awake?"

She didn't stir. He glanced over at the monitors. Everything looked normal, as far as he could tell.

They had been camped out at the Fort Monckton Military base for two days. Sam had insisted that she was taken there. It was a Secret Service training centre, and he wanted her under 24/7 protection. The hospital wing was tiny and basic, but the staff had treated her like royalty.

George had barely left her side since they'd let him in to see her. The previous five days had been the worst in his life. It was the longest time he'd been without her. With the exception of the odd night out with her friends, she was always there: pottering around the kitchen, tidying

his room, snoozing on the sofa with Marshall curled up in her lap.

She had come to take care of a six-year-old George when his mother had died, and she'd lived with them ever since. However, George didn't really know any different as he'd been brought up by his gran from day one. His mum had gone back to work soon after he was born, and all his young memories were of him and Gran. Going to the park, learning to read, trips to the zoo; it was all with Gran.

George was about to get up from his seat when he heard his dad's voice outside the door.

"She's stable, but it was touch and go," Sam said under his breath.

"Has she said much?" a woman asked.

George recognised her soft voice. It was Cate Knowles.

"Not much. She came to last night but was disorientated. The nurses just wanted to keep her calm and comfortable."

"Makes sense. There's no rush. As soon as she's ready, I'm more than happy to sit with her."

"Any other progress?" Sam asked. "Did we get anything at all from George and his friends?"

"We got lots of detailed insights, and they all pretty much married up. With that, and the snippets of CCTV from the vault, Scotland Yard and the hub, we can pretty much pull together the whole timeline."

"What about the abduction? Do we have anything on who broke into my house?"

"Your hidden cameras were taken out. Whoever entered had done their homework. They disabled all your surveillance."

"Who the hell?"

George could hear the frustration in his dad's voice.

"Sam, listen. Felix Patterson, George's friend, he told us about a fire."

"Right."

"We found it, in the grounds of the school, not far from where the tyre tracks were."

"And?" Sam pressed.

"We've gathered up all of the burnt debris. Forensics are piecing it together as best they can. It's gonna' take a while, but from what we can see it's letters, documents and the remnants of a red bag," Cate whispered. "Does that mean anything to you?"

George could barely make out what Cate was saying. He leaned over the armrest, towards the door. With that, an alarm sounded and George toppled clean out of the chair. Just as he was picking himself up from the floor, a nurse dashed in and flicked the lights on, quickly followed by Cate and Sam.

"What's going on?" cried Sam.

George peered around the nurse. Gran was sat bolt upright in bed.

"Well," the nurse said, "your mother has removed her cardio monitor."

"Gran!" George was by her side in a heartbeat.

"Good morning, my gorgeous boy," she said, smiling so broadly that her whole face creased up like a soft, overly-ripe peach.

"Take it easy," the nurse said, reattaching her to the monitor. "I think we should keep this on for a bit."

"I'm perfectly fine thank you, young lady," Gran insisted. "There's no need to fuss over me."

"Just take it easy," Sam said, moving around to the other side of the bed.

"I must have done something special to have both my boys at my bedside," she said, as the nurse propped her up with pillows.

George smiled but glanced at his dad. He was worried that she had no memory of what had happened.

"I'm not sure 'special' is the word I'd use," Sam said. "How are you feeling?"

"Wonderful," she said, beaming at him.

"Do you know why you're here?"

"Well, I assume it has something to do with this," she said, holding up her bandaged wrists.

George glanced at his dad again. Sam was looking uneasy.

"Mum, I think that – I'm sorry but–"

"Let's give your mum some space," Cate said, stepping forwards. "There's plenty of time to talk once she's got used to her surroundings. We'll go grab some breakfast. I'm sure the nurses need some time with her right now."

Sam nodded. As Cate ushered George and Sam out of the warm room, George looked back over his shoulder and couldn't help smiling as Gran turned and winked at him.

"Do you think she remembers anything?" Sam asked, as they wandered down to the canteen.

"It's early days," Cate said. "She'll be confused and in shock. It may be a blessing if she doesn't remember everything."

They grabbed a coffee and some bacon sandwiches. The officers' mess was busy with trainees. George stood out like a sore thumb. Several quizzical stares were being thrown his way.

"But she's the only witness," Sam said, as they sat down with their trays. "With Philippe and Jefferson refusing to

talk, it's our only other lead. If we can find out who broke in that night, then we might be able to track them down and–"

"Sam, leave it to me. I think it's best if I conduct the de-brief."

George couldn't help noticing that Cate had placed her hand on Sam's and his dad's shoulders had visibly eased at her touch.

"Thanks, Cate," Sam said. "I just want her to feel safe. We mustn't let her know that the threat is still out there."

"It's OK. We'll stick to the story. She doesn't need to know more than absolutely necessary."

Sam squeezed Cate's hand. "I know you'll look after her."

"A-hum!" George coughed. "What story?"

He felt invisible and slightly awkward at the chemistry between his dad and Cate.

"We'll find out what Gran knows first, and then we'll tell her it was a case of mistaken identity – a drug vendetta gone wrong," Sam said.

George frowned. "Will she fall for that?"

"I can't exactly tell her she was kidnapped as a personal revenge attack on her own son. How would I explain that one?" Sam said.

"I guess," George said, but he was sure Gran would have her suspicions. She always saw straight through him whenever he tried to lie his way out of trouble.

It was another twenty-four hours before they were allowed to bring Gran home. Her memory was slowly returning, and Cate had sat with her for a good part of her

last day in the hospital, but Cate had updated Sam in private, much to George's frustration.

As the unmarked ambulance pulled up behind them, outside their cottage, George looked over at his dad.

"Will she be OK?" he asked, worried that going back home would trigger more unpleasant memories. "We should have cleaned up the door."

"I got it done," Sam said, climbing out of the van. "I've had all new locks, cameras, alarm and a new door put in. There's no evidence left to remind her."

"Good," George said.

He was keen for everything to go back to normal but knew that things would never really be the same.

It didn't take long to get Gran settled back in. She acted as if nothing had happened. George kept asking her if she was OK to which she always replied, 'Right as rain, my boy.'

Marshall had been fed by one of Sam's colleagues that had been fixing up the house and looked like he'd put on a few pounds. He struggled to leap up onto Gran's armchair but quickly retook his place on her lap, purring loudly.

After a few days, Sam told George that he was planning on going back to work. "Now remember, you must text me if you need to go out. I don't want her left here on her own for too long."

"We'll be fine, Dad, honestly. I'll look after her." George reassured him. "Are you allowed near Philippe and Jefferson now?"

"Maybe," Sam whispered.

He was eager for Gran not to overhear them talking about the case, but George figured she couldn't hear a thing with the TV up so loud.

Gran had given a pretty good account of the night she was kidnapped, but the attacker had managed to creep into the kitchen, knock her out and smother her in a hood. There was little chance of getting a positive ID from her statement, so they were back to pressing Philippe and Jefferson for leads.

George had been thinking about what he had heard in the hospital. Something had been nagging at him.

"Dad, I wondered whether we should look into that post van? You know, the one that nearly ran us off the road that night," he said, tentatively.

"Hmm, I looked into it already, but it wasn't linked to a person of interest."

"But maybe the stuff that Felix saw – burnt letters and a red bag and–"

"You been earwigging?" Sam said, frowning.

"Er, I just overheard you and Cate…"

"George, I appreciate your input, but really, you need to focus on getting ready to go back to school."

"But, Dad–"

"I mean it, George. You've done more than enough to help."

That was the end of the conversation. Sam made his way out to his shed. With Sam back at work and school re-starting, George knew that their time together would go back to how it was before – intermittent, at best.

It was Monday morning, and George had one more day to get himself sorted before school restarted on Tuesday, including buying new uniform and shoes. The burnt-out east wing of the school had been cordoned off, and Mrs

Hamilton, the Headmistress, had managed to arrange to borrow a few pre-fab buildings to be trucked in to make up for the lost space. Letters had been sent out to all parents informing them of all the new safety measures that had been put in place to stop anything like this from happening again. Plenty of rumours had circulated about what had caused the fire – none of them true.

George opened one eye and nearly leapt out of his skin. Gran was sitting at the end of his bed staring at him.

"Sorry, gorgeous boy," she whispered, "didn't want to wake you. You looked so peaceful."

"What time is it?"

"Gone ten, Georgie. You've got errands to run."

"Er, yeah. I've gotta' go and get my new school stuff," he said, dragging himself from under his bed sheets.

"You want me to come with you?" she asked, standing up and straightening out his duvet.

"No, it's fine, Gran. I'm meeting Felix. You'll be alright here for a bit – on your own?"

"I won't be alone. I've got Marshall," she giggled, leaning down to pick up the clothes that he'd dumped on the floor.

It felt so good to have her there, safe, back home and fussing over him. But as she straightened up, George's eyes fell to the scars on her ankles, and the anger rose up in him. He bit his lip.

"Leave that, Gran, I'll do it," he said, rising to his feet.

She beamed at him. "Well, why don't you get yourself ready, and I'll pop on some porridge."

"You should be resting."

"Oh – no need to fuss over your old gran. I'm absolutely fine."

"But, Gran, the doctor said–"

"He knows nothing," she said, tutting.

"But what you've been through – please, Gran, just take it easy."

"I'm much tougher than I look," she said, bundling up his laundry.

As she shuffled from the room, she stopped and turned to look at him. "You know, George, scars fade – even the ones on the inside."

But George wasn't sure that that was true.

"Breakfast's ready!" Gran called, ten minutes later. "Get it while it's hot."

George stumbled out of his room and was surprised to see his dad on the landing.

"Dad! Why are you still here?"

"Good morning to you too," Sam said, pulling his faded blue cap from his back pocket and shoving it on his head.

He looked like he'd hardly slept.

"I just thought you'd be in the office already."

"Shh! Quiet, George. Gran's up."

"But I thought you were interrogating Mr Jefferson today," George whispered, "and I just–"

"That's enough!"

With that, he pulled his cap down lower and disappeared down the stairs.

Sulking, George lumbered down the stairs after him and almost tripped over Marshall, who was loitering in the hall. He was slowly returning to his normal, obnoxious self, now that Gran was home. George scooped him up and carried him towards the kitchen.

Sam was trying to eat his steaming porridge while fumbling with his phone. He almost dropped it into his

bowl. Gran shook her head as she passed him and winked at George.

"You never were any good at doing two things at once, Samuel," she said, handing George his breakfast.

"I've got to go," Sam said, ditching his bowl.

"Of course, taps and boilers can't wait," Gran chirped.

George smiled and watched his dad leave, his face still buried in his phone, his frown as bevelled as always.

After breakfast, George went upstairs to change. Felix was due to meet him in Pendleton at midday. He was just combing his hair when he heard a knock at the front door. He froze. He could hear Gran's voice. He dropped the comb and raced to the top of the stairs. She was standing outside. Someone was there. George could see their shadow on the hallway wall. He bombed down the stairs and reached the bottom just as she turned and stepped back inside.

"Who was that?" George said, trying to peer around the door.

"Just the postman, Georgie," she said. "No need for alarm."

"The postman?"

"Yes, you know, the man that delivers the post."

"Why did he knock at the door?"

"He had a parcel, I think."

"What parcel?"

"Wrong address," she said, shuffling back down the hallway.

George re-opened the door and peered out into the street. In the distance he could make out the back end of a small red van. He slammed the door and went back into the kitchen.

"Gran, you really mustn't open the door to strangers."

"It was the postman," Gran repeated, bending down to stuff the laundry into the washing machine.

"You can't trust anyone! You never know if–"

"If what?" Gran said, straightening up and looking straight at George. "If Victor comes back to get me?"

"What?"

"He's not coming back, boy. He was far too intent on leaving the country." George stood gob-smacked. "They all think I'm a daft old bat. That Officer Knowles in particular with her story about 'mistaken identity'. Nothing gets past old Cerys Jenkins – I'll tell you that."

"But Gran – you need to tell them – if you know more than you're saying, you must tell them."

"I've told them what they need to hear," she said, bending down again to finish with the washing.

George came closer. "Gran, we need to catch him. He needs to pay for what he did … to you, to everyone he hurt."

"He didn't hurt me. I'm as tough as old boots," she said, lifting a basket loaded with wet clothes. "Ouch." She flinched and grabbed at her ribs.

"He did hurt you, and I'm going to make him pay," George said, taking the basket from her.

"No, George. You leave that to your father."

From: Chief
To: C38
Re: Bird of Prey {Encrypted}

Update 26.1

Officer C38, I have authorised Officer J21 to rejoin the investigation into the whereabouts of the bird of prey.

He has been cleared by the psych team, but I fear his mental state to be fragile.
I do not want him to have access to the subjects being questioned without you present.

He is your senior, but I instruct you to keep a close eye on all his dealings.
He has refused to reveal the details of the Dungeness tip-off.
He insists on protecting his source.
You are closest to him – make sure he stays within protocol.

End.

From: C38
To: Chief
Re: Bird of Prey {Encrypted}

Response to Update 26.1

Orders received.

End.